LOS ANGELES TIMES
31 March, 1985

The Silent War Claims a Casualty

In Divided Germany, Spies Come From East and West

STAT

By David Wise

WASHINGTON

The intelligence war constantly waged between East and West remains unseen—and largely ignored—until there is a casualty.

The shooting down of the U-2 spy plane over the Soviet Union in 1960, the seizure of the electronic spy ship Pueblo by North Korea in 1968 and last week the slaying of a U.S. Army officer, Maj. Arthur D. Nicholson Jr., in East Germany, are sharp reminders that silent war can be both dangerous and deadly.

Nicholson, shot by a Soviet guard while photographing Soviet military equipment in East Germany, is the first casualty of the peculiar "licensed espionage" carried on in Germany by the United States and the Soviet Union.

A 1947 accord permits both sides to gather intelligence about each other. Under the terms of the agreement, the U.S. mission's 14 members observe Soviet forces in East Germany, just as Soviets maintain observer teams at three locations in West Germany. Each side has declared specific restrictive zones out of bounds to liaison teams.

Although a U.S. group is headquartered in a white stucco villa in Potsdam, East Germany, two- or four-man intelligence-gathering teams usually set out by jeep from West Berlin. They are permitted to cross into East Berlin on the Glienicke Bridge—site of the 1962 exchange of U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers for Soviet master spy Rudolf I. Abel—that is closed to all other traffic. U.S. officers, equipped with cameras, infrared film and high-powered binoculars—some, presumably, for night vision—are unarmed.

The intelligence teams attempt to learn as much as possible about Soviet military equipment and troop disposition and movement. They try to observe Soviet and East German military maneuvers in the spring and fall, and it is then the work can be most hazardous. American jeeps are sometimes rammed or bumped by East German trucks. One former member of the U.S. mission tells of 90-mile-an-hour midnight car rides into East Germany, to prevent the Soviets from learning where the Americans were going. And there is the ever-present danger—at least for Americans—of being shot. But the accord offers unusual advantages to both sides. Nowhere else in the world are intelligence agents for Washington and Moscow legally *permitted* to observe each other's hardware and troops at close range. It is a sort of permanent open season for spies.

Continued

This arrangement, though not secret, was not widely known until Nicholson's death last Sunday. There have been other casualties in the unseen war. The most publicized occured Aug. 31, 1983, when a Soviet fighter shot down Korean Air Lines Flight 007, killing all 269 persons aboard, including 61 Americans. The Soviets claimed that the plane resembled a U.S. RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft that had earlier flown near the airliner.

The Americans who perished in the KAL incident, however, were not the first shot down by the Soviets in peacetime. At least 52 Americans in eight reconnaissance aircraft have been attacked and killed by the Soviets since 1950. Adding the 31 crew members of the EC-121 downed by the North Koreans in 1969, the count is 83 Americans. Other casualties are less visible. On the white marble wall inside the lobby of Central Intelligence Agency headquarters are 46 stars, each representing an officer killed in the line of duty since 1947.

The spy war can be dangerous for the world, not just for the players. In a nuclear age, each incident, each clash by night, carries with it the potential for disaster. That potential was dramatically stated by Lyndon B. Johnson, in a 1969 CBS interview after he left the presidency: "The real horror was to be sleeping soundly about 3:30 or 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning and have the telephone ring and the operator say, 'Sorry to wake you, Mr. President' . . . . Had we hit a Russian ship? Had an accident occured? We have another Pueblo? Someone made a mistake—were we at war?"

But as the recent shooting demonstrated, public fear varies with the way each side handles the episode. The Reagan Administration has responded to Nicholson's death in a low key. Gone was the rhetoric and barrage of outrage that accompanied the KAL incident. Though Washington called the shooting "totally unjustified," President Reagan went out of his way to say that it would not make him abandon hope for an early summit meeting with new Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev. "It would make me more anxious to go to one," he said.

Although both sides issued differing versions of the incident when it became known on Monday, by week's end the gap between the Soviet and U.S. accounts had narrowed substantially.

Nicholson, 37, a Russian linguist and an intelligence officer by training, had been attached to the U.S. Military Liaison Mission since February, 1982. Last Sunday, accompanied by his driver, Sgt. Jessie G. Schatz, and dressed in a regular military camouflage field uniform, Nicholson approached a Soviet military storage building near Ludwigslust, East Germany, and began taking pictures of equipment through an open window. He was shot by a Soviet guard, killed by one bullet in the chest.

Senior State Department officials said that the area had been temporarily restricted—possibly to conceal military maneuvers—but that the restriction had been lifted, in writing, on Feb. 20. An official explained that both sides routinely carry cameras, although taking photographs is prohibited by the U.S.-Soviet agreement and film confiscated. Conceding Nicholson was taking pictures, the official insisted, "We feel the use of deadly force is totally out of keeping with the rule. They [the U.S. officers] are not in a position to defend themselves."

The official admitted that "there is a certain cat-and-mouse quality to this operation." And it was clear from a list provided by the Pentagon that there have been previous clashes. In the wake of the shooting, the United States was pushing for a meeting with the Soviet military, for improved ground rules, to avoid such violent incidents in the future.

Nicholson, a Soviet specialist with a master's degree in international relations, is survived by his parents, his wife, Karyn, and a daughter, Jennifer, 8. No one needs to tell them the human cost of unseen war.

David Wise's most recent book about intelligence is "The Children's Game: A Novel of Espionage" (St. Martin's Press).